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LESSON # 20

RESURRECTION: Cornerstone of Christianity



OBJECTIVE: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. But what actually happened in 33 AD? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Or does some alternate theory best explain what is known about that important year? This article will look at the evidences for the resurrection and evaluate alternate theories.

Alternate Theories

Numerous alternative theories to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ have been proposed over the centuries. They all attempt to explain what actually happened in 33 AD in Judea without appealing to the miraculous.

These theories are listed below and they are (1) The Stolen (2)

This article will evaluate some of the more important of these theories.

1) Stolen Body:

The **first alternative theory** to look at is the oldest. It is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 28:11-15. Here, the soldiers guarding the tomb are bribed by the chief priests to say, "His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept" (Matt. 28:13).

Matthew 28:11-15

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Paul Little comments, "That story is so obviously false that Matthew doesn't even bother to refute it! ... Who knows what goes on while he's asleep? Testimony like this would be laughed out of any court" (Little, p.25).



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There are several other points which also don't hold up in this theory. First, how would the disciples have moved the stone without waking the guard?

Second, John records that the linens used to wrap the body were still in the grave (John 20:5-7). Why would grave robbers have taken the time to unwrap the body?

John 20:5-7

⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

Third, it is very unlikely all of the 4-16 men comprising a Roman guard would fall asleep. Remember, a Roman soldier falling asleep on the job would be executed. And if they were awake, they could have easily stopped the apostles. "The soldiers were a trained fighting unit. One soldier could have easily dealt with the entire group of disciples" (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.93).

Fourth, if the disciples had stolen the body, then they would have all been persecuted and killed for something they knew was a lie. "Men will die for what they believe to be true, though it may actually be false. They do not however, die for what they know is a lie" (Little, p.25).

Fifth, this theory doesn't account for the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The NT records that He appeared to over 500 people following His death (1Cor 15:6). So this theory breaks down at every point.

1 Corinthians 15:6

⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

A variant of this theory is the proposal the Romans or Jews were the thieves. But "Why would the authorities do the very thing that caused all their problems?" (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.95). Neither the Romans nor the Jews had any motive to steal the body.

B) Wrong Tomb:

This theory is the women in their grief went to the wrong tomb and everyone else followed suit. But Matthew records that during Jesus' burial, "Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb" (Matt 27:61)

⁶¹ *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. To suggest*



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that two women sat and watched a Man who had been very important to them being buried and then two days later to forget where He was buried stretches credulity.

Also, John states that he and Peter ran to the tomb immediately after being told by the women that they had seen Jesus (John 20:1-4).

John 20:1-4

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" ³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. They did not follow the women. So John and Peter would have also had to have been mistaken about where their Master had been buried. Further, if they had gone to the wrong tomb, why was there empty linen clothes lying on the floor of the tomb? (John 20:5-8).

John 20:5-8

⁵ *He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.*

⁶ *Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.*

Further, Jesus had been buried very near to where He had been crucified (John 19:38-42). So "... why did the high priests and other enemies of the faith not go to the right tomb and produce the body?" (Little, p.26).

And again, this theory doesn't account for the resurrection appearances.

C) Hallucinations:

To answer the question of the resurrection appearances, the hallucination theory has been put forth. The idea is the disciples wanted to see Jesus alive so much they only imagined seeing Him. This theory also breaks down on several counts.

First, the followers of Jesus were NOT expecting to see Jesus alive again. "Mary came to the tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning with spices...to anoint the dead body of Jesus" (Little, p.30; see Mark 16:1).

Moreover, "Christ's followers were caused to believe against their wills" (McDowell, *Evidence*, p.253). Thomas said, "Unless I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and



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put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25; see also Luke 24:10-12, 24).

John 20:25

²⁵ *So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*

Luke 24:10-12

¹⁰ *It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.*

Luke 24:24

²⁴ *Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."*

Second, it wasn't only Jesus' followers who later preached the resurrection. James and Paul were initially skeptics; but they both became believers as a result of Jesus' appearance to them (1Cor 15:7f).

1 Corinthians 15:7

⁷ *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,*

Third, the resurrection appearances occurred in a wide variety of settings, to people of varying temperaments at different times. However, hallucinations, "... are very individualistic. It is very unlikely that two persons would have the same hallucination at the same time" (McDowell, *Evidence*, p.249). And it is even less likely 500 would have the same hallucination or different people at different times.

Fourth, "Hallucinations usually occur over a long period of time with noticeable regularity" (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.86). After the ascension, the appearances stopped except for the one to Paul several years later; but he makes it clear that this appearance was exceptional (1Cor. 15:8).

1 Corinthians 15:8

⁸ *and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*



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Lastly, this theory doesn't account for the empty tomb. To try to combine this theory with the stolen body theory will not do. Both theories break down on several points, not just one or two.

D) Swoon Theory:

This theory states that Jesus never really died. Instead, it is claimed, He just swooned on the cross and in the coolness of the tomb revived.

First, "This is a theory of modern construction All of the earliest records are emphatic about Jesus death" (Little, pp.26f). Keep in mind, the Koran was not written until 600 years after the time of Christ; whereas, the Gospels were all written in the first century.

Second, remember the story of Josephus' three friends? After hanging on crosses for only a short time, they were taken down. Yet, even with medical attention, two of the three still died.

Compare this situation with that of Jesus. Jesus was scourged before He was crucified

Matthew 27:26

²⁶ *Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Before being taken down, He had been on the cross for six hours and had a sword shoved in His side*

Jesus was then laid alone in a tomb and a guard placed outside (Matt 27:57-65).

Mark 15:25

²⁵ *It was the third hour when they crucified him.*

Mark 15:33

³³ *At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.*

John 19:34

³⁴ *Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*

Matthew 27:57-65

⁵⁷ *As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.* ⁵⁸ *Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him.* ⁵⁹ *Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,* ⁶⁰ *and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away.* ⁶¹ *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.* ⁶² *The next day, the one after*



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Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how."

Given the cruelty of Roman crucifixion and these added difficulties: Is it possible to believe that he would have survived three days in a damp tomb without food or water or attention of any kind? Would he have survived being wound in spice-laden grave clothes? Would he have had the strength to extricate himself from the grave clothes, push the heavy stone away from the mouth of the grave, overcome the Roman guards, and walk miles on feet that had been pierced with spikes? (Little, p.27).

After all this, are we to believe, "He could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that he vanquished death?" (McDowell, *Evidence*, p.234). "Finally, if Christ did not die at this time, then when did He die and under what circumstances?" (McDowell, *Islam*, p.124). All records of the life of Jesus from the time end with the ascension.

E) Substitution Theory:

Some orthodox Muslims have proposed, "...God made someone else look like Jesus and that this person was crucified instead" (McDowell, *Islam*, p.107). Others have also made similar proposals (Baigent, p.379).

First, this idea has God involved in fraud and Jesus agreeing to the deception. This contradicts their known characters.

Second, Jesus was seen by thousands during his ministry. Surely someone would have noticed that the wrong man was being crucified. Also, Jesus' mother stood at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). Surely a woman can recognize her own son!

John 19:25

²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Third, if the wrong man was crucified, he "... would have raged from the cross that he was not Jesus ..." (McDowell, *Islam*, p.107). Yet, no such cries are recorded by the eye-witnesses.



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Fourth, this theory also ignores the question of the empty tomb and the nature of the resurrection appearances. Jesus said to have appeared to the disciples behind closed doors and disappear at will (John 20:19; Luke 24:31).

John 20:19

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"

Luke 24:31

³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

Fifth, as with the swoon theory, it also ignores the question of what happened to Jesus after 30 AD.

Sixth, this proposal has God killing an innocent bystander. Some Muslims have attempted to evade this problem by saying Judas was the victim (McDowell, *Islam*, p.107). But this idea contradicts Matthew's statement that Judas committed suicide (Matt 27:3-10).

Matthew 27:3-10

³ When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ⁴ "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." ⁵ So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." ⁷ So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on him by the people of Israel, ¹⁰ and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

And the question must be asked, "Who is the more reliable historian -- Matthew, an eye-witness, or Mohammed, who lived centuries later?"

Lastly, this theory was not invented until the seventh century. It is merely an attempt to explain an ambiguous statement in the Koran.

F) Passover Plot:

The next theory to study was promoted by Hugh J. Schonfield in his best-selling book, *The Passover Plot*.



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Basically, the story line is:

Jesus of Nazareth was just another nice guy whose luck ran out. Convinced that he was the Jewish Messiah, he connived to have himself arrested, drugged, crucified, and revived to fulfill the Jewish scriptures as he understood them.

Unfortunately for the comatose Jesus, a soldier jabbed a spear into his side before his henchmen could remove him from the cross. Later, all attempts to revive him were fruitless; his secret Jerusalem followers quietly buried him in a spot unknown to his Galilean disciples, who soon repeatedly mistook the beloved disciple, a young priest from Jerusalem, for Jesus himself.

Subsequently, the eleven prominent Galilean disciples and others began propagating the incredible message that Jesus had risen from the dead. Christianity was born (Babcock, p.245).

This theory suffers from several of the same problems as previous ones. What about the empty tomb that was being watched by a Roman guard?

How could the disciples have spent 3 1/2 years, day and night, with Jesus and then mistake someone else for him? How could the unknown man appear through locked doors and disappear at will? How could Jesus, who taught honesty and integrity His entire ministry, have involved Himself in such a deliberate, attempted deception?

As with the other theories, Schonfield rejects a large part of the known facts and only accepts the few points that fit his theory. It seems his own preconceived ideas and vivid imagination are utilized in developing this theory rather than historical fact.

G) Mystery Religions/ Gnosticism:

This suggestion is the apostle Paul merely utilized the prevailing beliefs of the mystery religions and gnosticism of his time and adapted their concepts of a dying and risen savior into his preaching.

First, this idea simply ignores all the known historical facts discussed previously in this paper.

Second, "In the case of the alleged mythical parallels ... the evidence suggests that the Gnostic redeemer myth does not predate the writing of the Gospels" (Blomberg, p.101). Further, "... all extant manuscripts with Redeemer Hymns are from AD 140 or later -- while Hymns of Philippians and 1 Timothy can be dated no later than the first century AD" (see Phil 2:5-11; 1Tim 3:16; Nash, p.228).



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Third, "Aside from this weighty chronological consideration ... there are major differences in content between the Christian and Gnostic hymns" (Nash, p.228). The redeemer hymns have the god dying and rising annually (Nash, p.140). This cycle was usually in conjunction with the rebirth of spring (Blomberg, p.101). However, the Bible presents Jesus as dying only once and rising only once (Heb 9:24-28).

Lastly, it is doubtful that the redeemer myths actually record a bodily resurrection. "One can speak of a 'resurrection' in the stories of Osiris, Attis and Adonis only in the most extended of senses" (Nash, p.173).

H) Paul's Creation:

The last proposal to study is the most radical of the theories. It simply claims that Paul made up the whole idea of a crucified and risen Jesus because he thought it was a good idea.

This theory was suggested in the controversial movie of the late 1980's, "The Last Temptation of Christ". During the dream episode (while Jesus is on the cross), the following dialogue occurs between Jesus and Paul:

Jesus: I was never crucified, I never came back from the dead. I'm a man like everyone else. Why are you telling these lies...?

Paul: I don't care whether you're Jesus or not, the resurrected Jesus will save the world and that's what matters I created the truth out of what people needed and what they believed. If I have to crucify you to save the world, then I'll crucify you. And if I have to resurrect you, then I'll do that too, whether you like it or not (quoted in Ankerberg, p.34f).

This scene obviously ignores ALL the known facts. As with *The Passover Plot* and *Schonfield*, the producers of "The Last Temptation" are suggesting a rewriting of history in accordance with their preconceived ideas. There is no historical evidence supporting their proposal. And remember, Paul was beheaded for preaching this story he supposedly just "made up."

Summary:

Eight alternate theories have been investigated. All have been found wanting. None of them comes even close to explaining ALL of the known facts. All have logical and historical problems.

There are probably others that have been proposed over the centuries that have not been covered here. And most likely, even more will be put forth as time goes by.



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But all of these theories seem to have several things in common:

- 1) They start with the assumption that a miracle did not occur.
- 2) They always have to ignore at least some historical facts.
- 3) History is rewritten in accordance with the inventor's preconceptions.
- 4) The authors all seem to have very vivid imaginations.

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